

# Sonning Eye walk

With **Andrew Clark**

This lovely circular walk offers the opportunity to explore the local countryside and stroll beside one of the most famous rivers in the world. There are stories of a Viking burial, a famous poet, a gambler and a mill with a new lease of life. In spring there is the added attraction of a stunning display of bluebells.

**START:** The Flowing Spring, Henley Rd, Play Hatch, Oxon RG4 9RB. Grid ref SU 746 767. The landlord has given permission to use the car park and would be delighted to serve you some refreshments. Note: the pub and car park are closed on Mondays

**DISTANCE:** 5.8 miles with 250ft of ascent

**TERRAIN:** An easy walk with two gentle climbs and one steep descent

**MAPS:** OS Explorer 171, Chiltern Society 4

**REFRESHMENTS:** The Flowing Spring, The Plowden Arms at Shiplake Cross and The French Horn at Sonning Eye. The Mill at Sonning is opening a café in spring 2015

**PUBLIC TRANSPORT:** None at the start. Bus 800 runs between High Wycombe and Reading all week and stops in Binfield Heath and at The Plowden Arms.

## Route

Exit the car park and turn left uphill to the main road. Cross with great care and climb the steps ahead to the field above.

1. Turn right along the permissive path and keep to the edge of the field for 120m. Turn right through a gap in the hedge and go down the steps to the bottom. Turn left and walk a few metres to a path junction.
2. Turn left uphill on a bridleway and stay on it, ignoring all tracks left and right, for 1km to meet a lane. Turn right and follow the lane for 280m through the edge of Binfield Heath, passing the entrance to Gravel Road.
3. Just after a house on the left-hand side of the road called 'The Old Club House', turn right onto a footpath signposted to Shiplake. Follow the right-hand field edge and where that sweeps to the left continue straight ahead through a gap in the hedge into the next field. Stay in the same direction along the field's right-hand edge to a stile at the end. Cross the stile to drop down into Shiplake Cope, and follow the path through the wood to emerge into a field.
4. Bear left uphill on the left-hand edge of the field. At the top go forward for 40m and turn left through the hedge into the next field. Go straight ahead across the field for 240m and turn left to pass to the right of a small clump of trees. Ignore the stile on the left and continue to the corner of the field. Turn right and follow the fence line for 180m to a disused stone stile. Turn left through the gap in the fence and stay in the same direction to meet the concrete access road to Shiplake Farm. Bear left and continue onwards to a lane (Plough Lane).



5. Turn right along it to the main road and The Plowden Arms. Cross carefully to Church Lane and walk along to St Peter and St Paul's Church. Go past the main entrance and into the gravel car park of Shiplake College. Bear right in the car park and take the bridleway downhill. At the bottom, follow it round to the left past the boatyard and onto the bank of the Thames.
6. Turn right over the wooden footbridge and follow the Thames Path for 3.3km all the way to Sonning Bridge.
7. Turn right along the road past the entrance to The Mill at Sonning to reach The French Horn.
8. Cross the road to take the footpath opposite and bear right in front of the gate to 'Farleigh Cottages'. Continue along the surfaced path to a lane. Turn left onto it and continue to a T-junction. Turn right then stay straight ahead at the next junction past the entrance to Reading Sailing Club. Go through the gate at the end of the lane to the main road. Cross with great care and go through the gate directly opposite. Follow the path past allotments and along the left-hand edge of a field. Where that bends to the right, go left through a gap in the hedge and over a small footbridge. Do not go into the lane, but continue along the left-hand edge of the next field for 100m, then go left through a gate into the lane. Turn right, cross a stone bridge and turn left into the car park of The Flowing Spring.

## Points of Interest

The Flowing Spring's unusual name derives from a nearby natural spring which used to supply the pub with all its water. Parts of the building date back to the 18th century, but it's unclear how long it has been a pub.

- A Binfield Heath:** The village probably dates back to Anglo-Saxon times when it would have been part of a collection of temporary settlements used when the Thames flooded. The name may have come from a corruption of 'Beonan' and means 'a field belonging to Beona'.
- B Shiplake Cope** looks its best in spring when the woodland floor is a carpet of bluebells. Over the years the plant has had many uses. In the Bronze Age, bluebell glue was used to attach feathers to arrows, while in Elizabethan times ruffs were stiffened with its starch and the sap was used to bind books.
- C Shiplake:** The name probably means 'stream where sheep are washed' although another theory is that it could be the site of a Viking ship burial. Records show that The Plowden Arms was an ale house in the mid-18th century, but some of its timbers date back to the 1600s. It has had a few names including The Plow, The Plough Inn and The Plough Hotel. The 12th century church of St Peter and St Paul is noted for its medieval glass windows. On 13 June 1850 poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson, was married to Emily Sellwood, a cousin of the Vicar's wife. Some say that Tennyson wrote a poem commemorating the wedding and

dedicated it to the Vicar of Shiplake in lieu of payment.

- D Shiplake College** was originally known as Shiplake Court, which dated back to the 12th century. It was rebuilt in the 14th century by the Englefield family and later was the residence of Sir Edmund Plowden. In the late 18th century the then owner gambled away all his money and the house fell into such disrepair it was demolished in 1804. The current building dates from the 1890s and is now an independent school.
- E The Mill at Sonning:** There has probably been a mill on the site since Domesday in 1086. The present mill dates back to 1797 when it was rebuilt following a fire. In the 1980s it was converted into a theatre and restaurant complex. In spring 2015 The Mill will be opening a new café - please contact them for opening times. Members of the Chiltern Society can sometimes obtain special offers when booking for shows.
- F Sonning Eye's** name is of Saxon origin and derives from 'Sunna' who was a chieftain, and 'Eg' which describes a settlement on an island. Its history is very much entwined with the main village across the Thames in Berkshire and has been a major crossing point of the river since Roman times. Over the centuries there have been a number of bridges; a Saxon one, a medieval wooden one and finally the current brick bridge built c1785.